

Seoltar an aighneacht seo mar chuid de chomhairliúchán an Tionóil ar Bhille um Thaispeáint Bratacha agus Suaitheantais. Iarrtar ar an Choiste Bonneagair glacadh leis an aighneacht iomlán seo mar fhreagra oifigiúil ar an chomhairliúchán agus na hathruithe atá molta a chur i bhfeidhm sa leagan deiridh den bhille seo.

Faoi na freagróirí

Is é Conradh na Gaeilge fóram daonlathach phobal na Gaeilge agus saothraíonn an eagraíocht ar son na teanga ar fud na hÉireann uile agus timpeall na cruinne. Is í príomhaidhm na heagraíochta an Ghaeilge a athréimniú mar ghnáth-theanga na hÉireann.

Ó bunaíodh é ar 31 Iúil 1893 tá baill an Chonartha gníomhach ag cur chun cinn na Gaeilge i ngach gné de shaol na tíre, ó chúrsaí dlí agus oideachais go forbairt meán cumarsáide agus seirbhísí Gaeilge. Tá ról lárnach, ceannasaíoch ag Conradh na Gaeilge i ndearadh pholasaithe, straitéisí agus pleananna gnímh.

Tá Conradh na Gaeilge roghnaithe ag Foras na Gaeilge, an foras uile oileánda ag feidhmiú ar son an dá Rialtas thuaidh agus theas leis an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, mar cheann de na sé cheanneagraíocht atá maoinithe acu leis an nGaeilge a fhorbairt ar oileán na hÉireann. Go príomha, tá Conradh na Gaeilge roghnaithe le tabhairt faoi chosaint teanga, ionadaíocht agus ardú feasachta ar an Ghaeilge.

Tá breis is 180 craobh agus neart ball aonair ag Conradh na Gaeilge, agus bíonn baill uile an Chonartha ag saothrú go dían díograiseach chun úsáid na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn ina gceantair féin. Tá breis eolais faoi obair an Chonartha le fáil ag www.cnag.ie.

Introduction

1.1 Fáiltimid go mór roimh an deis ionchur a bheith againn sa chomhairliúchán tábhachtach seo - we warmly welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation. Our submission seeks to address some of the concerns and questions we have about the bill in its current format, whilst making a series of recommendations which we feel would strengthen the bill's overall impact by giving an insight into the lived experience of the Irish language community. This bill provides a unique opportunity to ensure that the regulation of flags and emblems does not legitimise displays which are intended to intimidate, exclude or create a hostile environment for those seeking to use and promote the Irish language. Equally, the Bill should provide sufficient clarity and safeguards to ensure that physical expressions of linguistic diversity, including the use and display of the Irish language, are protected, respected and supported. We hope that our comments and recommendations are taken on board.

1.2 Initiatives and policies which seek to increase the visibility of the Irish language here are often met with physical manifestations of intolerance and sectarianism, the impact of which is felt most acutely across the Irish language community. The failure to adequately regulate or address these acts has contributed to an environment in which such behaviour is not only tolerated, but increasingly legitimised by leading public institutions. Too often, the mere physical display of the Irish language is portrayed as a provocation for such attacks, which are, at times, worryingly described as '*inevitable*'. This framing effectively places blame on those who seek to use and promote the Irish language, rather than on those responsible for acts of intimidation, vandalism and hostility towards it.

1.3 More worryingly, leading public institutions have become so accustomed to the normalisation of these attacks that they often allow the threat of such hostility to influence and dictate their policy positions. This is, in no small part, a consequence of the inadequate regulation and the limited accountability faced by those responsible for these acts, which this bill itself seeks to address; acts of vandalism, intimidation and hostility towards the Irish language are met with no consequences, and as a result, a clear message is sent to the perpetrators that this behaviour is tolerated and, in practice, allowed to shape public policy. Rather than addressing and challenging the behaviour of those undertaking such acts, there is a growing tendency to accommodate and legitimise the threat of intolerance by limiting or curtailing physical expressions of the Irish language.

1.4 There have been several instances which demonstrate the reality still faced far too often by Irish speakers, despite numerous advancements in areas of Irish language legislation and policy. Whilst not all of the instances alluded to below refer specifically to street furniture, they are particularly relevant because the consultation on the Display of Flags and Emblems bill takes place against a backdrop of a broader culture in which the threat of vandalism, intimidation or other intolerant behaviour is afforded undue influence over measures which seek to increase the visibility and accessibility of the Irish language, something which has been compounded by a failure to meaningfully regulate such acts.

1.5 In 2019, Belfast City Council consulted on the erection of dual language signage across four city-wide leisure centres; the consultation report recorded that attendees at an event in Lisnasharragh Leisure Centre threatened that, *“We will burn it to the ground before an Irish sign goes up.”*¹ Following scrutiny of the consultation report, a subsequent political decision was taken not to proceed with the proposed dual-language signage. It was and remains unfortunate that, rather than challenging intolerant views and negative attitudes towards the Irish language, Belfast City Council, in taking this decision, actively enabled them to dictate their policy position.

1.6 More recently, in May 2026, during a Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council debate on its policy for dual-language street signage, PUP councillor Russell Watton warned that any dual language street signs erected in his area *“would be down the next morning”*, adding that *“the grinders are sitting waiting”*². This example is particularly concerning in the context of the present consultation, as it demonstrates how the anticipated threat of vandalism and hostility towards Irish-language signage can become a factor in determining whether such signage is permitted in the first place. This particular case also illustrates the extent to which opponents of the Irish language have become emboldened to openly threaten such acts, reflecting a wider environment in which the intimidation and vandalism of dual language (Irish/English) signs can be discussed as though it were an expected or inevitable consequence of increasing the visibility of the language.

1.7 A further example can be found in Cookstown and Coagh, where dual-language (Irish/English) street signage has been repeatedly targeted with criminal damage. In July 2026, Mid Ulster District Council was informed that signs on Killymoon Street in Cookstown and at Ballinderry Bridge Road in Coagh had been vandalised, with the latter reportedly having been targeted on multiple occasions³. Councillors were also advised that a man had been arrested in November 2025 as part of an investigation into damage to signage in the Coagh area, but, several months later, the Council was still seeking an update as to whether the legal process had concluded. The repeated targeting of this sign (and others) is illustrative of the wider concern that acts of vandalism against the Irish language on signage can become normalised when those responsible are not held meaningfully to account. The circumstances surrounding the vandalism of the signage in this area also demonstrates how opposition to Irish language visibility can extend beyond individual acts of vandalism and into organised attempts to prevent the erection of such signage. It was reported across various media outlets that this act of vandalism was followed by the organisation of a petition opposing the introduction of dual language signage in the area.

1.8 It is often overlooked that the law already provides specific protection against the defacement or removal of street signage. Article 11(5)(a) of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 1995 makes it an offence for any person to obscure, pull down or deface a nameplate erected by a council. The seriousness of interference with legally erected street signage is already recognised within the legislation, which expressly

¹ Belfast City Council consultation on the decision to erect bilingual / multilingual external naming and internal directional signage in Andersonstown, Lisnasharragh, Olympia and Templemore Leisure Centres, January 2020 - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Nze7uceY_v6XnptFk2rPDGdxGTh9n1CA/view

²

<https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/pup-leader-says-grinders-are-waiting-for-dual-language-street-signs-in-his-area-E6A44YH43ZFBHHCURKN3QKPXJM/>

³ <https://www.impartialreporter.com/news/26295911.english-irish-street-signage-vandalism-condemned/>

provides that any person who obscures, pulls down or defaces a nameplate erected under the Order is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine. It is, therefore, difficult to justify allowing the threat or reality of conduct which is already unlawful to become a determining factor in whether public authorities permit the lawful display of the Irish language in the first place.

1.9 It is also hugely important to recognise that, in each of the above cases, the fault does not lie with the presence of the Irish language; rather, it lies with those responsible for undertaking such threats or acts of vandalism. Despite this, equality assessments too often fail to adequately reflect this distinction, instead identifying the visibility of the Irish language itself as a potential source of damage to good relations. Once again, this framing risks placing responsibility on those seeking to use and promote the Irish language, rather than on those responsible for hostile or unlawful behaviour towards it. Public authorities must therefore recognise the impact of failing to adequately address and reprimand such incidents. Where such behaviour is left unchallenged, the prospect of hostility or intimidation risks becoming a de facto veto on the visibility of the Irish language.

1.10 A further and particularly stark example occurred on Belfast's Lisburn Road in July 2026, when a Union flag bearing an offensive, hostile slogan (pictured below) was erected on a lamppost in the Lisburn Road area of Belfast.



Photo credit: The Irish News

1.11 As can be seen from the above image, the Union jack was defaced with the Belfast City Council logo and with an explicit message; Belfast City Council recently adopted one of the most progressive Irish language policies on this island. The policy was supported overwhelmingly both in the public consultation conducted by Belfast City Council and by a significant majority of elected representatives (42 in favour VS 17 opposed). The erection of this flag is therefore no more than an attempt by a small, intolerant minority to intimidate Irish

speakers and to undermine the extremely positive advancements that have been made with regard to the Irish language throughout Belfast in recent years.

1.12 Upon becoming aware of this flag, we (Conradh na Gaeilge), called for its immediate removal and contacted the Department for Infrastructure, the PSNI, Belfast City Council and the Irish language commissioner to issue a formal complaint and officially request that the offensive flag be taken down. We also considered that there were significant grounds for the erection of this flag to be treated as a hate-crime against a protected minority community under The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM) and as a language protected by the Identity and Language Act NI (2022). The manner in which our request was handled was both deeply disappointing and hugely concerning; the Department for Infrastructure responded to inform us that they were in the process of engaging with the PSNI on this matter, as well as with Belfast City Council, to determine whether there was clear local community support for the removal of the flag. Local community support is problematic on a number of grounds; firstly, it is extremely difficult to quantify or assess objectively. When asked how exactly such support could be determined, Belfast City Council advised the Department for Infrastructure to contact the local councillors for the area; the only elected representative for the area in question is DUP Councillor Tracy Kelly, whose party's long-standing track record of opposition to the Irish language speaks for itself. Furthermore, the concept of local community risks creating a situation whereby hostility towards the Irish language could be sufficient to generate the level of local opposition required to justify retaining an offensive flag, then those responsible for that hostility are effectively rewarded with influence over the outcome. More worryingly, the Department also responded that they would be satisfied to remove flags *"where we are satisfied that removing them will not raise local community tensions or present risks to the safety of our staff and contractors."* This is deeply concerning because it risks allowing the anticipated reaction of those opposed to the removal of an offensive flag to determine whether that flag remains in place. As we have alluded to, public authorities should not allow the threat of disorder or intimidation to become a de facto veto over the removal of material which is itself offensive or hostile towards the Irish language.

1.13 The PSNI's analysis concluded that neither the FCPNM or the Identity and Language Act created a specific offence in respect of the display of this flag. This response is indicative of a wider difficulty experienced by Irish speakers: although the Irish language has acquired a range of statutory protections in recent years, those protections do not necessarily translate into the same level of recognition or institutional protection afforded to characteristics expressly protected under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. Language is not itself listed as a standalone Section 75 category, and this distinction can have significant practical consequences when Irish speakers encounter hostility, intimidation or discriminatory behaviour directed specifically towards their language. In circumstances such as these, there is no doubt that the absence of an explicit Section 75 protection for language contributes to an institutional reluctance to recognise hostility towards the Irish language as a matter requiring the same seriousness of response as hostility directed towards other protected characteristics.

1.14 More than 2 months after the erection of the flag and following continuous engagement, it was finally removed at the beginning of September 2026⁴. Whilst we warmly welcome the fact that it was removed and that it sets a clear precedent for the removal of any future offensive, anti-Irish language material on public street, there are serious questions as to the manner and time taken to deal with the matter, as well as the assessment criteria used by the responsible authorities in determining whether or not to remove such materials.

Examples of graffiti/destruction/removal of Irish language material on street furniture



[Photo Credit: Belfast Media Group](#)



[Photo Credit: Belfast Telegraph](#)



[Photo Credit: The Irish News](#)





[Photo Credit: Belfast Telegraph](#)



[Photo Credit: Belfast Telegraph](#)



[Photo Credit: Belfast Newsletter](#)



[Photo Credit: Belfast Telegraph](#)



[Photo Credit: Derry Now](#)

Recommendations for the bill itself

1. Clause 1(4)(b) – Local views

The reference to considering “*the views of those living in the vicinity of the flag or emblem*” upon deciding whether or not to remove it is problematic. Local residents should not hold an ultimate veto in instances where the flag or emblem is hostile, abusive, offensive or intimidating to the Irish language. The Code should therefore make clear that local views must be assessed objectively and should not be treated as determinative where those views themselves reflect hostility, discrimination or prejudice towards the Irish language or its community of speakers.

2. Clause 4(3) – Statutory consultees

The Irish Language Commissioner has a specific statutory role in relation to the Irish language and is therefore uniquely placed to advise on whether a flag, emblem or associated display may have implications for the status, visibility or treatment of the Irish language and its community of speakers. The Irish Language Commissioner should therefore be expressly added to the list of statutory consultee to reflect his statutory role in protecting and promoting the Irish language under sections 78J–78L of the NI Act 1998.

3. Clause 7(1) – Interpretation

The definition of relevant conduct should expressly include graffiti, defacing, vandalism, and the removal or damage of public street furniture.

4. Code of Practice – Page 7, Line 35

The absence of an expressed reference to respect for the Irish language risks creating an incomplete framework for assessing the impact of a flag or emblem on the local community. The Code should expressly state that the Irish language and its community of speakers are to be treated with respect, consistent with the statutory recognition of the status of the Irish language under section 78J of the NI Act 1998.

5. Clause 1(3)(b)(ii) – National or cultural identity

The Code should clarify that the provision concerning a place being “*belonging exclusively to persons with a particular national or cultural identity*” must not be interpreted as legitimising false or misleading claims concerning the provision of dual-language signage. The existence or provision of bilingual or dual-language signage is a matter which should be assessed by reference to the relevant statutory and policy framework (in line with the 1995 Local Government Order and the 2022 Identity and Language Act) rather than being treated as evidence that a particular place belongs exclusively to one national or cultural identity.

6. Code of Practice – Page 6, Line 9 / Clause 1

The Code should require consideration of whether a flag or emblem is inconsistent with the statutory recognition and protection of the Irish language under sections 78J–78O of the NI Act 1998, including whether the display is offensive, hostile, intimidating or degrading to the Irish language or its community of speakers.